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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000350

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SUBJECT: LESOTHO: FORMER BOTSWANA PRESIDENT LEADS SADC DIALOGUE  
EFFORT

REF: MASERU 337

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: A mere two days after a SADC Troika report on Lesotho's political impasse called for a SADC-facilitated dialogue, former Botswana President Ketumile Masire arrived in the capital city of Maseru for a six-day effort aimed at resolving a post-election stand-off that has at times threatened to devolve into violence. Masire's nascent effort has restored faith in the SADC process, which had deteriorated during the two months it took for the Troika to produce its report. His cautious approach to actual mediation, however, may fall short of a broad local consensus that the impasse will persist unless the country's political parties finally agree to sit down and talk face-to-face. End Comment.

¶2. (U) Following the June 11 delivery to Lesotho of a SADC Troika report on Lesotho's post-election impasse, former Botswana President Ketumile Masire arrived in Maseru on June 13 at the head of a SADC delegation for a six-day effort aimed at achieving a dialogue among the country's political parties. The June 11 assessment report, offered by the "SADC Ministerial Troika Mission of the Organ on Politics, Defence, and Security Cooperation," called for the GOL to initiate a formal political dialogue, facilitated by SADC and an "imminent person" from among the region's former Presidents. (Note: Masire was an international observer with the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa during Lesotho's February 17 election. End Note.)

¶3. (U) On June 14 former President Masire called on the King of Lesotho, Prime Minister Mosisili, and the Independent Electoral Commission and held a briefing with the heads of diplomatic missions. He also planned to consult with church groups, media organizations, and the Lesotho Congress of NGOs (LCN). On June 15, Masire, accompanied by several SADC officials, intends to hold separate consultative meetings with the opposition parties and with the governing LCD party.

¶4. (SBU) In his briefing with the diplomats, Masire offered very little about his specific dialogue or mediation efforts. He said that the President of Tanzania, as Chair of the Troika, has asked him to "see what is happening in Lesotho and find out how to put out the fires." Queried by Charge about press reports indicating that Masire would mediate a direct dialogue between the governing and opposition parties over the weekend of June 16-17, the former President said he had no plans at this point to bring the two sides together, "because they'll just shout at each other." He said he hoped to garner "a little bit of give from each side," adding that he would stay as long as necessary if the parties demonstrated a desire for concrete negotiations.

¶5. (SBU) Asking for views from the diplomatic chiefs of mission

(whom he called "objective observers"), Masire heard from Irish Ambassador Paddy Fay, acting dean of the corps, who offered international community support for the SADC mediation effort. Fay emphasized that dialogue between the GOL and the opposition was essential in order to avoid violence. U.S. Embassy Charge observed that while dialogue was vital, it should not supplant the role of the courts, given various legal aspects to the electoral impasse and the growing independence of the judiciary. Charge also noted that some political leaders had accused the governing party of manipulating the Mixed Member Proportional (MPP) Election model, but in fact both the governing party and the opposition had used loopholes and dubious alliances to maximize legislative seats, equally undermining the spirit of the model.

16. (SBU) The South African High Commissioner, speaking as "a SADC member and neighbor of Lesotho," urged President Masire to "put down markers" with the political parties by insisting that they look forward and not attempt to retroactively undo election results. (Note: In a meeting among Chiefs of Mission on June 12, the South African noted that Prime Minister Mosisili will make an official state visit to South Africa on June 19, where SA President Mbeki will "raise as a priority the domestic political situation in Lesotho and demand to know what the GOL is doing to resolve it." End Note.) The UN Resident Coordinator told Masire that there is a "sense of urgency" to resolve the impasse, saying "We don't think the political leaders want to destroy the country, but an unresolved impasse puts the country at risk." The European Commission Charge echoed the sense of urgency, informing Masire that the public's fundamental misunderstanding of the complex MMP model was a partial source of the impasse.

17. (SBU) Responding to the diplomats, Masire said that he would appeal to the political leaders to keep the best interests of Lesotho in mind. "If the ship sinks," he said, "everyone on board sinks - and the political parties must come to understand this." He acknowledged that expectations are high for SADC "to come up with something" to help resolve the impasse. "I may

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need you (diplomatic community) to come to my rescue," he concluded, "but I'm optimistic that we can find a solution."

18. (SBU) The UN Resident Coordinator, Hodan Haji-Mohamud, told Chiefs of Mission after the briefing with Masire that she had been approached by Tom Thabane, head of the leading opposition party ABC. Thabane said that he had accepted the LCD election victory, but would not endorse the SADC report or the dialogue effort because the report did not insist on a role for international election experts to propose changes to Lesotho's MMP election model and validate the allocation of legislative seats. The UNRC said that Thabane, claiming that the Tanzanian President had stripped these elements from a draft version of the Troika report, insisted that the international experts be part of the equation before the ABC would enter into a direct dialogue.

Comment: Restoring Faith, Falling Short

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19. (SBU) Former President Masire's arrival in Lesotho, a mere two days after delivery of the Troika's report calling for dialogue, is viewed locally as an important step in helping to resolve an impasse which has at times threatened to devolve into violence, if not paralysis of the parliamentary government. His packed schedule of consultations has also restored faith in the SADC process, which had deteriorated during the two months it took for the Troika to produce its report. Masire's cautious approach to actual mediation, however, while prudent, may fall short of a broad consensus among local observers that the impasse will persist unless the parties finally agree to sit down and talk face-to-face. End Comment.

MURPHY